PERSONALITIES, POLICIES AND INTERNATIONAL HISTORY: A TRIBUTE TO DONALD CAMERON WATT

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Abstract: This brief essay pays tribute to the contribution of Donald Cameron Watt (1928-2014) to the historiography of twentieth-century international history and the origins of the Second World War in Europe. It sets out his characteristic approach to the field, especially the emphasis he placed on the beliefs and perceptions of key decision-makers in the international system in explaining how and why events occurred the way they did. This essay suggests that Donald Watt's approach to international history was shaped by the connection he felt with the post-1919 founders of the field and by his own experiences in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War.

Donald Cameron Watt, who died on 30 October 2014, occupies a central place in the historiography of twentieth-century international politics and the origins of the Second World War. Born on 17 May 1928, he was educated at Rugby School, where his father was a housemaster. Later he won a scholarship to Oriel College Oxford to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics. In 1954, Donald Watt joined the Department of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science where for over forty years he inspired students with his charm, whit and exhaustive knowledge of international history. The LSE promoted him to Professor in 1971, and ten years later he was appointed to the UK's premier academic post in the field in international history, the Stevenson Chair.[1]

Perhaps the most important formative experience of his intellectual life was the Second World War, especially its immediate aftermath. Eleven-years old when the war broke out in 1939, Donald Watt's school years were punctuated with filling sand bags, learning how to wear a respirator, gazing at the contrails of bombers flying towards Europe and the breaking news from the front of crushing defeats and, eventually, victories. Too young for military service during the war, Donald Watt as a young conscript was assigned to the British army of occupation in Austria, where he witnessed the enormous human and material consequences of European civilisation's capacity for self-destruction. As an

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[1] 'Professor Donald Watt: Obituary', *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 November 2014 at http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/11229261/Professsor-Donald-Cameron-Watt-obituary.html; Robert Boyce, 'Professor Donald Cameron Watt (1928- 2014)', Department of International History: News, 10 November 2014, at http://www.lse.ac.uk/internationalHistory/news/DonaldCameronWatt.aspx
A list of Donald Cameron Watt's publications can be found in Michael Graham Fry, ed., *Power, Personalities and Policies: Essays in Honour of Donald Cameron Watt* (London, 1992), pp. 299-320.

acting sergeant in Field Security on the hunt for neo-Nazis and war criminals, he was introduced to the bewildering complexity and ethnic hatreds of central and east-European nationalist politics. These experiences fed a desire to understand the war's origins that took Watt in 1951 from Oxford to the team of young scholars led by the eminent diplomatic historian Sir John Wheeler-Bennett assigned to edit and publish the captured archive of the German Foreign Ministry.[2]

In 1954, Professor W. Norton Medlicott, then the second holder of the Stevenson Chair in International History (Sir Charles Webster had been the first), recognised Watt's talent for documenting and interpreting the intricacies of foreign policy making in the 1930s by appointing him to junior lecturer at the London School of Economics and encouraged his interest in the origins of the Second World War. Watt always spoke of Medlicott with fondness and admiration. He admired the way in which he always tried to understand past statesmen in their own historical context and the way in which he refrained from the sort of harsh judgements that were all too easy to make with the benefit of hindsight.[3] Watt also credited Medlicott for championing the transformation in Britain of diplomatic history into what we now call international history.[4]

That transformation and Donald Watt's important part in it is the key to understanding how he conceived of his own values and purpose as an historian. The foundation of international history in Britain dates from the end of the First World War, when a group of influential liberal internationalist intellectuals and philanthropists, many of whom had been active in the movement to found the League of Nations to prevent future wars, set out to found a new 'scientific' study of international affairs based on the 'objective' study of official records.[5] They

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[2] On the role of the captured documents in post-war historiography, see Astrid M. Eckert, *The Struggle for the Files: The Western Allies and the Return of German Archives after the Second World War* (Cambridge, 2012); D. C. Watt, 'British Historians, the War Guilt Issue, and Post-War Germanophobia: a Documentary Note', *The Historical Journal* 36 (1993), pp. 179-85.

[3] D. Cameron Watt, 'Medlicott, William Norton (1900–1987)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004 at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/66374

[4] See W.N. Medlicott, 'The Scope and Study of International History', *International Affairs* 31 (1955), 413-26; on the origins of international history, see Patrick Finney, 'Introduction: What is International History?' in Patrick Finney, ed., *Palgrave Advances In International History* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 1-35.

[5] David Stevenson, 'Learning From The Past: the Relevance of International History', *International Affairs* 90/1 (2014), 5–22; and more generally Casper Sylvest, *British Liberal Internationalism, 1880-1930: Making Progress?* (Manchester, 2009), pp. 148-225.

believed that the triumphalist nationalism that had pervaded the teaching of European history before 1914 had been a cause of the Great War. If another disaster was to be avoided, then the way in which history was taught across the European continent had to change. The peoples of Europe and their leaders had to learn that the policies and actions of their nations could only be understood and calculated in relation to those of other nations and that their fate for good or ill was bound together. In other words, the European great powers existed in a Hobbesian state of nature, but the condition of international anarchy did not condemn them to perpetual war. Among the initiatives to achieve this ambitious goal were the foundation of the British (later Royal) Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House), and the endowment of professorships, including the Woodrow Wilson Chair in international relations at the University College of Aberystwyth in 1919 and the Stevenson Chair in international history in 1925, with Chatham House as its first home until it moved to the LSE in 1932.[6]

Donald Watt embraced the values and goals of the post-1919 founders of international history as his own and saw his work on the outbreak of the Second World War as part of the larger project. He saw international history as a form of 'disaster studies', in other words an inquiry into the coming of the two world wars to acquire useful knowledge and insights that might help to prevent a third, and most certainly final, global war owing to the advent of nuclear weapons.[7] Doctoral students who took part in his methodology seminars in the early 1990s will recall analysing the correspondence of Sir Daniel Stevenson, the liberal-minded Scottish philanthropist who funded the Stevenson Chair, to discover the original purpose behind the foundation of international history. As Watt taught, the key principle that Stevenson articulated was that the history of international politics had to be written from *multiple* national archives, both official and private holdings, to obtain a balanced and systematic perspective on the unfolding of international events and the decisions and actions of the key statesmen and officials involved. As Watt put it in his 1983 inaugural lecture for the Stevenson Chair, 'the historian of international relations, particularly when concerned with the disaster studies aspects of the field, engages himself in

[6] Stevenson, 'Learning From The Past', 8-10.
[7] Donald Cameron Watt, *What about the People? Abstraction and Reality in History and the Social Sciences* (London, 1983), pp. 4-5.

studying in depth, over time and in the round, the character and mind of those certain personalities who have been identified as playing key parts in the chain of events and circumstances leading up to the moment of disaster.'[8]

The emphasis in this quote on key personalities was characteristic of Watt's approach to international history and his methodological contribution to the field. As the title of his first book, *Personalities and Policies*, succinctly put it, Watt argued that the policies of states and the course of their interactions could not be abstracted from the flesh and blood people, the political, military and economic elites, who formulated state policies and acted upon them. He was critical of diplomatic historians who unreflectively employed shorthand terms such as 'London', 'Berlin' or 'Paris', or 'the Foreign Office', 'Auswartiges Amt', 'Quai d'Orsay' and so on, to stand in for the complex, fluctuating and varied decision-making processes within a state and that often extended beyond those groups and individuals formally charged with the making of external policy.[9] To understand the foreign policy choices of states, he insisted, one needed to look both for the external influences and constraints that limited the options available to decision-makers and for the internal factors particular to each set of identifiable policy elites. Donald Watt was critical of scholars (in particular the practitioners of the history of American foreign relations) who assumed that international relations could be understood from the archives of any one state. For Watt, the writing of international history required the tracing of thought and action, causes and effects, across national boundaries over time, with identifiable individuals and structured groups (such as foreign ministries, treasuries and military staffs) as the key players in a complex game of interaction. Ultimately, as he put it, his approach was 'multi-biographical' or 'prosopographical'.[10]

Watt's preoccupation with the policy-making and decisions of identifiable people, the way in which they exercised power within a national political system,

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[8] Watt, *What about the People?,* 5.

[9] D. C. Watt, *Personalities and Policies: Studies in the Formation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1965); D. C. Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain's Place 1900-1975* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 1-6. Watt's colleague and friend Zara Steiner also deserves credit for drawing the attention of diplomatic historians to the role of officials and other influences on the making of foreign policy: see Zara Steiner, 'On Writing International History: Chaps, Maps and Much More', in International Affairs 73/3 (1997), pp. 531-46 and her ground breaking monograph *The Foreign Office and foreign policy, 1898-1914* (Cambridge, 1969).

[10] Watt, *Succeeding John Bull*, 4-5.

their mindsets and milieu naturally led him to focus on the role of *perceptions*. No contemporary could grasp perfectly how the whole interplay of interactions between states was unfolding. Misperceptions, miscalculations, misinformation, mistiming and mistakes and the unintended consequences they generated rendered a difficult process even at the best of times fiendishly complicated and terrifyingly dangerous in a crisis. 'Each chain of perceptions and interactions can be compared with the balls in snooker or billiards,' Watt wrote, 'but there are at the same time as many different games superimposed upon each other as there are decision-making groups involved – plus one more, the real game, as it is perceived [with the benefit of hindsight] by the historian'.[11] And while there was a real game, that reality was not fixed in the way it operated. As he described it, 'each player, or rather group of players, operates within a series of rules and conventions, some of which are held in common with the other players, some imposed by their own past training and experience, some a part of their relationship with their own particular audience of sponsors which will be in a perpetual clamour of advice, instruction and objurgation'.[12] With time, the rules and conventions of the game changed, as did the players and their audiences, though with greater frequency. According to Watt, the historian's working model (or *metaphor* as he emphasised) of the way in which the international system operated could therefore be elaborated and embroidered by the hour.

The prominence that Watt's conception of the international system gives to the rapid interplay of decision and perceptions within and between states led him to prize compelling narratives studded with rich personality portraits as the most suitable way to write the history of international politics. He urged PhD students to read detective stories as guides to good writing (the political thrillers and spy novels of Eric Ambler were a particular favourite of his). He compared the work of the international historian to that of the detective. Both involved the careful reconstruction of elaborate timetables and decision-making flow charts and an analysis of the behaviour of people under stress. In piecing together the course of events of a particular historical episode, Watt cautioned against the illusion of certainty and completeness. In a 1977 essay assessing A.J.P. Taylor's

[11] Watt, *What about the People?,* 16-17.
[12] Ibid.

work as a diplomatic historian, Watt dismissed the whole notion of the 'definitive monograph' formed from a study of *all* the evidence as 'Germanic dogma'. No scholar is free from biases and social conditioning. No set of sources is complete. The mountains of files in twentieth-century government archives obscures the yawning gaps in the record as well as the importance of what was not recorded in official records and, indeed, what was not recorded at all.[13]

In the 1980s, most historians regarded diplomatic/international history as an intellectual backwater. Political scientists elaborating theories of international relations, who might have been expected to attach some importance to international history as a source of empirical findings, dismissed the field as devoid of theoretical content and rigor.[14] As Stevenson Professor, Watt led the defence of international history against these two sets of criticisms. Although his preoccupation with archives and personalities sounded very much like a defence of pure empiricism, the opposite was of course true. His history was founded on deep reflections about the nature and origins of the international system, the nature of causation, the ethical role of the historian and the epistemological limits of historical research. He urged practitioners of international history to borrow from the analytical vocabulary and concepts of sociology, economics and above all international relations theory. However, there was a definable limit how far the historian could and should draw upon the social sciences. That limit was the point at which the real flesh and blood 'people' of the past became mere cardboard characters acting in compliance with grand theoretical constructs. Although, for instance, he admired the skill and ambitions of French practitioners of the *Annales* School of historians, he criticised them for reducing individual lives to mere data points in recurrent structures or universal concepts. He was also critical of Marxist historians such as Timothy W. Mason who portrayed Hitler's decision to attack Poland in 1939 as a 'function' of a larger socio-economic regime in 'crisis' rather than the fulfilment of an

[13] D. C. Watt, 'Some Aspects of A. J. P. Taylor's Work as Diplomatic Historian', *The Journal of Modern History* 49/1 (1977), pp. 19-33.
[14] For an influential and pessimistic assessment of the state of the field at the time, see Charles S. Maier, 'Marking Time: The Historiography of International', in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (Ithaca, NY, 1980), pp. 355–87.

ideologically framed intention. Watt saw these efforts to depersonalise history as fulfilling a need on the part of historians to achieve pseudo-scientific certainty.[15]

Watt's own aversion to abstractions and historical explanations based on large, impersonal structures and forces reflected his formative experiences. As a young conscript, he witnessed the destruction caused by the Nazi and Fascist revolutions. His first wife's family had suffered from the evil that was the Nazi 'Final Solution'. The advent of the Cold War was the backdrop to his time as a student at Oxford, as an editor of captured German records and as a lecturer at the LSE. The struggle between individual liberty and the collectivist doctrines of the mid-twentieth century instilled in him distaste for the dehumanisation inherent in statist ideologies, dogmatism and sectarianism. That distaste left him suspicious of any historiographical trend that appeared to turn individual humans into units.[16] The most eloquent and powerful statement of his defence of the individual in history appears in the preface to his magnum opus, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-39*. It is worth quoting his words here in full: 'This is not a story of men whose actions are determined by large, impersonal forces. The forces are there, but the stuff of history is humanity. Impersonal forces only figure in this narrative in so far as they formed part of the perceptions of the individual actors. History is lived through and, for the fortunate, survived by people. Their actions, their failures to act, their hesitations, their perceptions and mistakes act and interact upon each other across political, social and culture divisions'.[17]

How War Came was Donald Watt's masterpiece. In over seven hundred pages of meticulously researched and documented pages, the book covers events from November 1938, just after the notorious Munich Conference, to the start of the European war eleven months later. It exhibits all the qualities that Watt

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[15] Watt, *What about the People?,* 1-14.

[16] There is no comprehensive study of how the Cold War shaped methodological disputes among British historians or in the humanities generally during the early Cold War, but the relevant chapters of Peter Novick's *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988) and recent studies of the development of the social sciences are helpful indicators of how the battle lines were drawn: see for example M. Solovey and H. Cravens, *Cold War Social Sciences: Knowledge Production, Liberal Democracy, and Human Science* (Basingstoke, 2012) and George Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Sciences: Positivism and Its Epistemological Others* (Durham NC, 2005).

[17] D. C. Watt, *How War Came: The Immediate Origins of the Second World War, 1938-39* (London, 1989), p. xiii. This extract from the book was read at Donald Watt's memorial service at St Mary le Strand Church on 11 February 2015 by his grandson Fergus Cameron Watt.

prized most in historical writing: a careful reconstruction of the interaction of perceptions and misperceptions on the part of the key actors to the drama, and a remarkable number of insightful and often humorous pen portraits cataloguing the range of illusions, delusions, prejudices and conceits entertained by Europe's statesmen and diplomats in the rush towards catastrophe. Historiographically, the book is the culmination of a lifetime of revisionist writing on the British foreign policy of appeasement and the making of German foreign policy under the Nazi regime.[18] Although the leaders of all the great powers, Stalin, Daladier, Roosevelt, Mussolini and their foreign ministers, diplomats and military advisors, play their parts in *How War Came*, the central actors are the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain and the German dictator Adolf Hitler.

Watt's book was not a superficial account of a British prime minister bullied by Nazi threats. It is instead the story of how a confident and self-assured Chamberlain, who had succeeded in deterring Hitler from attacking the Czechs in September 1938, attempted to contain him again in 1939, but tragically failed to do so. The reasons for that failure, he argued, lie less in the personality flaws of the British or French leaders or in the strength of their armed forces, than in the personality and miscalculations of Hitler. Bitter at having been cheated out of his limited war in 1938 by a combination of Chamberlain's diplomacy, the dire warnings of his military advisors and a lack of enthusiasm for war on the part of ordinary Germans, the Führer simply refused to be deterred again. In the summer of 1939, he willed a war against Poland and through his own miscalculations he triggered a general European war that his generals had warned him would end in Germany's ruin. Watt sums up his argument in the final paragraph of *How War Came*: 'Neither firmness nor appeasement, the piling up of more armaments nor the demonstration of more determination would stop him – or, if it did, it stopped him only from 7 p.m. on August 25 until 4 p.m. on August 31, 1939.'[19]

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[18] For the various stages of his thinking about British foreign policy in the 1930s, see D. C. Watt, 'Appeasement: The Rise of a Revisionist School?' *Political Quarterly* 36 (1965), pp. 191–213; and his 'The Historiography of Appeasement,' in Alan Sked and Chris Cook, eds., *Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (London, 1976), 110–129. For a survey of the historiography, see Sidney Aster, 'Appeasement: Before and After Revisionism', *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 19, 3 (2008), pp. 443-480.

[19] Watt, *How War Came*, 624.

Sadly, owing to ill health and fading eyesight, Watt was unable to follow the recent transnational and global turns in the history of international relations. After he finished *How War Came*, however, he spoke about returning to the themes he first explored in his 1975 book *Too Serious A Business*. In the opening chapter of that book entitled 'The Nature of the European Civil War, 1919-1939', he framed the interwar years as a transnational 'civil war' between the forces of oligarchy, aristocracy and authoritarianism, Fascism and those of popular democracy, socialism and revolution. By doing so, he anticipated the current shift in the historiography from the activities of states to wider concerns such as ideas, culture, popular movements and economics.[20] What Donald Watt would have thought about the state of international politics over the last five years is open to speculation. My own view is that some guidance can be found in his introduction to the English translation of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, first penned in 1964 and revised in 1991, in which he warned readers not to surrender their 'birthright to doubt, to hesitate, to be undecided and uncertain, in brief the right to be free, for the certainty provided by someone else's faith, someone else's authority, someone else's inner vision.'[21] In this nationalistic, violent and uncertain time, Donald Watt, a deeply humane and remarkable scholar, would I think have asked today's statesmen the question that was the title to his 1983 inaugural lecture and which echoes across the last century and into this as a stinging rebuke: 'What about the people?'

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[20] Akira Iriye, 'Internationalizing International History', Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Los Angeles, 2002), pp. 47-62.
[21] D.C. Watt, 'Introduction', *Mein Kampf by Adolf Hitler* trans by Ralph Mannheim (London, 1992), xi-xiv.